

Moscow ■

TURKEY AND RUSSIA IN SYRIA

TESTING

THE EXTREMES

Ankara ■

HASAN YÜKSELEN

Damascus ●

SETA

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CONTENTS

FOREWORD	7
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	9
INTRODUCTION	11
CHAPTER ONE	
PRETEXTS – ORIGINS, ESCALATION, AND MUTATION	
Origins	21
Escalation	28
Mutation	34
CHAPTER TWO	
ACTS – IMPLICATIONS, CHANGE, AND ENGAGEMENT	
Implications of Territorialization: Diverging End-States, Changing Strategies	55
The Territorialization of DAESH, Strategy Change, and the U.S. Engagement	56
De-territorialization of the Regime, Strategic Change, and Russian Involvement	62
CHAPTER THREE	
OUTCOMES – DISTRUST, STRATEGY CHANGE, AND INTERVENTION	
The Growth of Distrust of the United States	77
Strategy Change and Its Military Reflection	104
CHAPTER FOUR	
IMPACTS – TESTING THE EXTREMES	
Testing the Extremes: From the Brink of War to the Test of Alliance	129
On the Brink of War: Testing One Extreme	131
Towards an Alliance: Testing the Other Extreme	139
CHAPTER FIVE	
PROSPECTS – FROM CHANGING CHARACTER OF WAR TO CHANGING CHARACTER OF RELATIONS	
The Changing Character of War	158
Changing Character of Relations	168
CONCLUSION	195
BIBLIOGRAPHY	203

To my family, Sevil, Melis, and Deniz

FOREWORD

Geographically positioned at the intersection of several regional disputes in the Middle East, Turkey has always been a major actor both in military and diplomatic terms. Especially in the Syrian crisis, Turkey is among the countries that have borne the brunt of the crisis militarily, diplomatically, and morally.

As the implications of an “alliance” seems to change daily, allies tend to experience disagreements over strategy on many issues. Moreover, states seek to cooperate with their old enemies on a range of diverse issues. For example, in recent years, Turkey has been engaging in intense diplomacy with Russia in the hope of finding common ground on regional conflicts.

Due to the problems in its neighborhood, Turkey is not in a position to afford one-sided dependence which could force the country to stop pursuing its national interests. Rather than one-sided dependence, Turkey aspires to “strategic ties” with the U.S. and Russia that, in turn, are vulnerable to tensions precisely because they provide no room for one-sided dependence. In today's world, however, a strategic partnership does not necessarily mean opting for an ideological bloc.

After the downing of the Russian fighter jet in 2015, the relationship between Turkey and Russia suffered from an increasing degree of unpredictability and instability. However, after the launching of Turkey's military operations in Syria, Turkey and Russia found grounds for cooperation and initiated the Astana process with Iran as a complement to the Geneva process. The Astana process has encouraged Turkey and Russia to work more closely in Syria.

Turkey and Russia, which have kept their conflicts of interest in Syria under control until now, could face new problems if their paths were to cross. Obviously, several third parties would be eager to take advantage of

a Turkish-Russian disagreement. Reactions from Washington and Brussels, too, are on Turkey's radar – the big question being what concrete support, beyond initial statements, would be offered by the West. In a time of Western unwillingness to engage Syria strategically, Turkey has been forced to find its own way forward. From time to time, the Turkish-Russian relations suffer serious ups and downs, and leader-to-leader diplomacy is the last resort before a strategic rupture in bilateral relations. If the two countries cannot find a new solution to growing escalations in Syria and the region within the current framework, the rapprochement of recent years could give way to alienation.

Russia must pay heed to the serious risks to the bilateral relations and stop playing the Idlib card against Turkey. Moscow's current course threatens to destroy the "strategic ties" that Ankara and Moscow have developed in recent years. For the Russians, Idlib may have strategic significance as a link between Damascus, Aleppo, and Latakia. Yet, the province means much more to Turkey. For Ankara, Idlib is key to secure its national security and is crucial to facilitating a genuine political transition process in Syria.

A quick look at the big picture reveals that the Kremlin didn't want to risk its fruitful cooperation with Turkey to appease the Assad regime. Putin saw that working with President Erdoğan was in his own best interest and that for the sake of the bilateral relationship's future, preventing clashes and reaching an agreement was the most sensible solution. After all, the many areas of cooperation between Turkey and Russia required the two countries to build on the leaders' long history of negotiations and manage the Syrian crisis together.

I strongly believe that this book provides a timely assessment of the current state of affairs of the bilateral relations between Turkey and Russia. By analyzing alliance options between Russia and Turkey, the book aspires to promote an understanding and an awareness of the possible future courses of the bilateral relations in light of the historical context. I thank the author for his fruitful contribution to the existing literature.

Prof. Dr. Burhanettin Duran
General Coordinator, SETA

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This book is the outcome of my postdoctoral studies that I conducted as a visiting research fellow at the Changing Character of War (CCW) Centre, Pembroke College, at the University of Oxford in 2019. It was a stimulating stay at the University of Oxford, where I found the chance to attend thought-provoking seminars, discussions, and talks. Being surrounded by astute students of strategic studies, the only thing remains is to absorb the knowledge, process, and pour your thoughts on paper.

During my stay, I had the chance to work with Dr. Andrew Monaghan, who is in my opinion an expert on Russia, and an avid student for his humble opinion. Andrew set ambitious and challenging objectives, which made my stay at CCW a productive one. I am grateful for his encouraging tutorship. The Director of CCW Dr. Robert Johnson made eye-opening comments, which increased the worth of my research. Elizabeth Robson was always helpful to facilitate the smooth functioning of my stay. An early draft of this manuscript was read by the CCW fellows, and their comments made vital contributions. I am thankful for their thought-provoking comments.

Apparently, there are no manuscripts that are mature enough to reach readers without critical debates and insightful comments by colleagues, fellows, and friends. Professor Hüseyin Bağcı, Associate Pro-

fessor Murat Yeşiltaş, and my colleagues Cem Bucak, Serkan Balkan, and Yiğit Sipahi read the early version of this book and provided their valuable comments. I am grateful to them.

I am also grateful to my family. With each book I write, my debt to them goes far beyond the words of appreciation. I am deeply grateful to my dear wife Sevil, and my children Melis and Deniz. Probably throughout my writing journey, they were the most affected ones. During my frequent absences, they never hesitated to back me, to be patient, and to show their boundless love. The dedication of this book to them only begins to mirror their devotion to supporting me. This book is an outcome of collective effort, and we made it again!

INTRODUCTION

On November 24, 2015, when Turkey downed a Russian Su-24 aircraft violating the Turkish airspace, it was perceived as an act with the inherent potential to trigger a war. Nevertheless, thankfully, it did not happen. Moreover, after restoring the relations within nine months, when Turkey reached an agreement with Iran and Russia to initiate the Astana process aiming to resolve the Syrian War and sealed the deal to purchase S-400 air defense systems, the question of whether a Russo-Turkish alliance was established was raised. From a broader perspective labeling the events as war and alliance might be seen as a misleading exaggeration. Nevertheless, treating them as tested extremes and exploring the underlying dynamics form a worthwhile and compelling intellectual endeavor.

This book will answer the key research question of which characteristics (changing or enduring) of the Syrian War caused Turkey and Russia to oscillate between the extremes of war and alliance. By focusing on these characteristics in Syria, commonly accepted as a proxy war but with subtle changes to the definition due to its context, this book shows how the changing character of war influences state behaviors and relations both between and among them. Addressing the underlying question of what makes states cooperate while carrying on and/or being forced to accommodate diverging strategic ends, conditioned

by unbalanced military power and laden with contentious agendas, uncovers the embedded controversies of the process that facilitates this oscillation. Finally, to reveal the broader implications, highlight the relevance, and to make a contribution to the literature based on the research, this study addresses the overarching question of how proxy wars alter interstate relations and relations within alliances.

The purpose of this research is to explore causal forces embedded within proxy wars that have the potential to alter the nature of relations between sovereign states. The fact that Turkey and Russia oscillated between the extremes within the context of the Syrian conflict is deemed to posit a case study that has the potential to contribute to the understanding of the causal forces of proxy wars and their implications on interstate relations, alliance formations, and/or alterations.

The importance of the research question stems from the unique context of the Syrian conflict. As for the context of the research, it is the embedded diverse, volatile, and conflicting dynamics of the actors, processes, and strategic interests of the protagonists, all of which lead to rapid changes in the orientation of actors and the direction of developments. Russia and Turkey, within the context of the Syrian War, faced similar kind of volatility in their relationship as well. Russia and Turkey have diverging views on the future of the Assad regime and the opposition groups while sharing converging prospects on the territorial integrity of Syria. Russia-Turkey relations also oscillated between the extremes, even testing them. The downing of a Russian fighter aircraft by Turkey pushed the two countries from rivalry to the edge of war, demonstrating one extreme; the Astana talks on the future of Syria and its outcome of establishing de-escalation zones, the Idlib accords, together with the agreed delivery of Russia's S-400 missile system to Turkey, highlighted the other extreme of a mutual alignment, to the extent of triggering international discussions about "Turkey's change of axis." The role of the U.S. actions or inactions has also contributed to the mutation of the conflict leading to a change in the character of

war. Particularly, the proxy relationship between the United States and the PKK offshoot, the PYD/YPG, impacted not only the character of war but also the character of relations.

The oscillation between the two extremes, war and alignment, or to put it differently and with a slight exaggeration, “a NATO ally at war; a NATO ally’s fallout,” demonstrates a fundamental lack of understanding of the dynamics of the Syrian conflict that paved the way to the emergence of these extremes.

The character of the war in Syria is commonly explained with the notion of a “proxy war,” in which states refrain from openly fighting with each other, but prefer to support proxies militarily to realize their political objectives. Another prominent feature that does not help common understanding is that the Syrian battlefield represents conflicting and incommensurable interests and prospects while harboring a diversity of terrorist organizations whose legitimacy could not be agreed on by the many nations involved. At the same time, the war has caused a humanitarian crisis.

Russia and Turkey have different and mostly conflicting strategic ends, which are still geopolitical in essence. Turkey’s primary strategic goal is to prevent the PYD/YPG from gaining any form of autonomy, and to keep the PYD/YPG contained and block its reach to the Eastern Mediterranean (EMED). At the same time, Moscow seeks to maintain its basing rights in Syria, allowing long-term power projection to the EMED and the Middle East. On the one hand, both Russia and Turkey agree on a future regime that ensures those objectives, yet, on the other hand, they disagree on its nature and configuration. Their tactical deployment of “means” to shape the conflict also differed. While Ankara relied more on lower-profile tools such as combat drones and special operations backing opposition armed groups, Moscow pursued its strategy with high-profile conventional naval and air forces in support of pro-regime forces. In that sense, the conduct of war and methods also differ significantly with the former using more sophisticated

and tailored methods in keeping with the needs of the battlefield and the latter preferring more conventional methods tailored to projecting power. However, in the end, it also suggests the different expectations from the post-conflict environment. Then the question arises as to what makes and drives them to keep cooperating despite the existing stark differences in terms of ends, means, and concerns. Normally, what would be anticipated is a further deterioration or, at least, a deepening of grievances between Ankara and Moscow, which is not extensively observed. Nevertheless, from the spatiotemporal context of the Syrian conflict, in which space refers to the limited geography of Syria and time refers to the duration of the war, a long-term enduring alignment/alliance is not expected, and offers a test of the extreme positions unless Ankara and Moscow find a common ground of understanding and interest in another additional and wider geographical area. Irrespective of how broad or narrow the conflict's spatiotemporal context, it has triggered broader implications and discussions.

This book argues that the territorialization of terrorist groups might prompt changes in the strategic calculations of external actors that initially might have been unwilling to intervene militarily. Their military involvement either to curb, alter, or lead the direction of the territorialization beyond having the potential to create deep grievances emerged out of diverging strategic threat perceptions, interests, or strategic end-states, which might alter their relationships. In other words, the changing character of war, which evolved into a proxy war, triggered a change in their relationships. In some cases old rivalries might be overcome, in others the solidarity between allies can be undermined. How this happens is explained through the growing agencies of non-state actors, who were employed as proxies, which becomes a factor that constrains – if not determines – the behaviors of state actors. Hence, the most relevant and boldest suggestion and conclusion of this book is that proxy warfare undermines long-lasting alliances and cultivates new ones, which might still be subject to the stress test.

Within this context, the book is organized in five chapters that address the evolution and change of the protests into an internal war and later into a proxy war. The first chapter of the book, “Pretexts,” is devoted to contextualizing how the Syrian conflict underwent a mutation that led to the territorialization of threats. The initial hesitance of the actors to become involved in the Syrian crisis, arguably not only caused escalation but also led to eventual mutation. Once the conflict had mutated, with the subsequent power vacuum, different non-state actors began to expand their influence in Syria with the support of state actors. The hesitance to support the opposition’s demands for regime change and the inaction to protect them against the atrocities of the regime, while causing the opposition to peel off and for some of its factions to radicalize, also opened conducive ground for the terrorist organizations with diverse agendas that stepped in to capitalize on that vacuum. The initial outcome of that process was the territorialization of the PYD/YPG, an offshoot of the PKK, with its secessionist goals in Syria which also later attempted to replicate the ‘Rojava’ model in Turkey.¹ The second element, similar to the statehood claim by the PYD/YPG, came by the rapid expansion of DAESH and the control of vast territories in Iraq and Syria, but with different terms of governing and driving ideology. The territorialization of these non-state actors was experienced at the expense of the deterritorialization of both the regime and the moderate opposition, a proponent of democracy.

The second chapter entitled “Acts” starts with a discussion on the implications of the (de)territorialization dynamics in Syria, which prompted major powers to change their strategies in line with the diverging strategic end-states. While the territorialization of the DAESH threat has led the U.S. to engage militarily and to establish a proxy relationship with the PYD/YPG, Russia was also militarily involved

¹ With the term “Rojava” model, I am referring to the efforts and attempt to build a proto-state in the east of the Euphrates in Syria out of the territorialization of a terrorist organisation, the PYD/YPG, at the expense of another terrorist organisation, DAESH, and its claim to govern the spaces it controls.

by using similar threats this time due to the deterritorialization of the regime. Their military engagements distanced Turkey both from Russia and the United States, leading to a deterioration of relations with both.

The third chapter, “Outcomes,” focuses primarily on the factors that brought about a strategy change in Ankara, which prompted a military engagement resulting from growing distrust towards U.S. actions and a response to the territorialization of the PYD/YPG. Ankara perceived the territorialization of the PYD/YPG along the Turkish borders in northern Syria as a threat, which was encouraged by the U.S. to deterritorialize the DAESH threat. The growth of distrust between two NATO allies (the U.S. and Turkey) upon the diverging threat perceptions and subsequent conflicting actions taken to alleviate them caused them to drift apart. The inevitable outcome of the process was the strategy change in Ankara that prompted military intervention first to fight DAESH and then to eliminate the PYD/YPG’s terrorism and to block its potential reach to the Eastern Mediterranean. This chapter discusses how Turkey’s military response evolved from a defensive one (Operation Shah Euphrates) to an offensive one (Operations Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, and Peace Spring) and its causal factors.

The fourth chapter, “Impacts,” is devoted to the analysis of the underlying factors that caused Russia and Turkey to oscillate between war and alliance. The theme this chapter will explore is how the changing character of war prompted the testing of extreme situations. Due to the ambiguous nature of the conflict, Turkey experienced several setbacks, as did all major actors following their respective miscalculations. After downing a Russian aircraft in Syria, Turkey was on the brink of war and tested one extreme of the relationship. This action can be seen as an outcome of the growing distrust towards Moscow’s acts in Syria, which were perceived as detrimental to Turkey’s security interests. Nevertheless, they managed to find grounds for rapprochement and to improve those grounds for further cooperation in Syria as the distrust and growing threat of the PYD/YPG with the support of the

U.S. became significant. The improving relations between Moscow and Ankara reached a level that raised the question of whether Turkey was disassociating itself from the West and even stepping back from NATO. The true nature of both war and alliance will be discussed to reveal the prospects and limits of the latter.

The last chapter of the book entitled “Prospects” capitalizes on the theme of the changing character of war to consider the changing character of Turkey’s relations with both the U.S. and Russia. The first part of the chapter will argue how a proxy war unintentionally created room for non-state actors to expand their agency, and eventually to determine the behaviors of their perpetrators. The erosion of awareness of state actors facing the embedded uncertainty of the changing character of war inadvertently brought about the erosion of their agency and introduced the determination of their actions by non-state actors. In other words, the proxy war and uncertainty not only soured their bilateral relations to the extent of almost causing a collision, as in the case of Turkey and Russia, but they also undermined the alliance coherence as observed in the case of Turkey and the United States. The second part of the chapter will discuss the primary determinants of the future course of relations for Turkey, both with the U.S. and Russia, since none of the actors could manage to overcome the distrust caused by the soured relations and fluctuating alignments of the past or to build trust for future constructive endeavors.

Finally, this book answers the following questions which broaden the theoretical perspectives on alliances and strategizing: Is the traditional understanding of strategic thinking and alliances still relevant? Are we in need of redefining and adapting our understanding of both the process of strategizing and alliances for the sake of being more adaptive and responsive to the changing character of war?



ONE

PRETEXTS – ORIGINS,
ESCALATION, AND
MUTATION



ORIGINS

The Syrian War, in its early stages, was no more than the people's request for more freedom and the improvement of their living conditions, which made it a pro-democratic movement in essence. In fact, it was a continuation of the Arab Spring's pro-democracy movements with a lower profile of protests. However, the democratic movements rallied against authoritarian leaders quickly transformed themselves from protests and uprisings into violence with the harsh response from the respective governments. Some of them proved themselves to be successful in ending the long tenure of authoritarian leaders as was observed in Tunisia and Egypt. In other cases, the violence overshadowed the quick success in the toppling of authoritarian leaders, brutally as in the case of Libya, and proved that they were mostly premature as in Egypt where the elected leaders were later toppled by a military coup. In each case, the uniqueness of the respective conditions altered not only the outcomes but also the reactions of international actors.

The Syrian case was thought to be a continuation of Arab Spring revolts, and it was assumed that their initial success would be replicated in Syria. However, the Syrian case displayed its uniqueness by refuting replicative attempts for the promotion of democracy, not only in the sense of underlying social conditions and structures but also in terms of the reactions and responses given by international and regional actors. In other words, the densely interdependent and interpenetrated nature of the Syrian dynamics proved itself with unleashing the unintended, unprecedented, and unexpected causal forces and consequences feeding the uncertainty of the environment.

This book will answer the key research question of which characteristics (changing or enduring) of the Syrian War caused Turkey and Russia to oscillate between the extremes of war and alliance. By focusing on these characteristics in Syria, commonly accepted as a proxy war but with subtle changes to the definition due to its context, this book shows how the changing character of war influences state behaviors and relations both between and among them. Addressing the underlying question of what makes states cooperate while carrying on and/or being forced to accommodate diverging strategic ends, conditioned by unbalanced military power and laden with contentious agendas, uncovers the embedded controversies of the process that facilitates this oscillation. Finally, to reveal the broader implications, highlight the relevance, and to make a contribution to the literature based on the research, this study addresses the overarching question of how proxy wars alter interstate relations and relations within alliances.

